

Oakridge Presbyterian Church

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If Our Church Would Move or Close, Would It Matter To Anyone?

Luke 7:1-10

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The short answer is “YES!” ... but I am not leaving it there – that really is too short as messages go.

I talked to a number of people and asked this question, but I want to start with a question that I was asked a number of years ago. In the summer of 2012 I was in the Netherlands for a Transcultural Learning Experience – it was a part of the M. Div. degree requirement to go into another culture and learn what the church was doing there. My mother lives there so I went to learn about the churches in and around her community. On a train ride heading to the airport to return to Canada I sat beside a young man who was approximately the age of my children and he was a student – we had a most interesting conversation as we shared our school experiences, I will call him Mark – Mark was a business student and I was a seminary student and his question to me was this... “do you think it is important that there be churches as there don’t seem to be many people filling them now?”

That’s a great question! ... a very practical question.... especially from a business perspective.

I wanted to say – of course it is important to have churches ! ...but I also wanted to keep the conversation going so I said something like, “one day people will return when they have nowhere else to go, and the churches need to be there when the time comes.”

When he heard that Mark made an interesting observation about his own family background, he said, “You know, whenever I go to my grandparents for a visit, we always pray at mealtimes, but at home my parents never do that – why do you think that is? ... And we don’t go to church. What do you think that means for me - will I get to know about God?”

What would you say to that question – should the churches be kept open? Does anyone care? I guess it depends on what we think the church is there for, doesn’t it? What do we think the church is? ... The hands and feet and heart of Jesus...?

There once was a Roman centurion who cared. In fact the Gospel writer of Luke tells us he cared so much that he built the synagogue for the Jewish people of Capernaum about 2,000 years ago. For some reason he believed it was an important part of the community.

This synagogue was important, not because it is the only place God is, but because it is a starting point that this man who is looking for Jesus knows to go to get connected with Jesus.

You just never know who God will use to bring about his purposes – the building of a place of worship for God’s people – fascinating! And if you think about it, doesn’t he seem like a most unlikely person to build it - I think it was important to God to have that building in that community too.

A centurion commanded 100 men – centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. Polybius, the historian describes the qualifications of centurions. “They must be men, not seeking danger, but men who can command, steady in action, reliable, not rushing to fight, but ready to hold their ground and die at their posts.” (Barclay , *Luke Commentary* p. 82) – When they are spoken of in the New Testament centurions are

spoken of well (Luke, Acts, Matt). This centurion was all that and more. ... in fact, he was quite different. Maybe that is why God chose him for the task – God sees into the heart.

Though he commanded 100 men he went to the Jewish leaders to ask them to appeal to Jesus for help. He values people – even the lowest – a slave; he loves and wants to protect those he is responsible for even if it means humbling himself to those he is in charge of, the Jewish leaders; typically the Jews despised the Gentiles and the Gentiles despised the Jews. But we don't see that in this centurion – he had an extremely unusual attitude to the Jews; he built them a synagogue, he could have used those resources for his own comfort, but he appears to be a deeply religious man – he would not have known all the religious rites and rules of the Jewish people, but he had great respect for their God and he wanted them to be able to worship. He recognized the authority of God. And when he heard of Jesus, he recognized that authority of God in Jesus and, he acted on it – ready to risk his own reputation – he trusts, he was ready to die at his post for who he believes Jesus to be; he was willing to humble himself to appeal for the life of a slave he could have thrown out because the slave had lost his usefulness;

This centurion is a very unusual Roman leader – the Romans were not known for their kindness, but he uses his authority for good; the Jewish leaders affirm that this centurion is worth helping; because he first helped them. This centurion is unusual because he operates on a relational basis with people – he loves them – and with God - he honors God - and with Jesus -knowing Jesus worked by God's authority, just as he himself worked by the authority of Caesar – he said so, "For I also am a man placed under authority, having under myself soldiers. I tell this one, 'Go!' and he goes; and to another, 'Come!' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." For I also implies that he recognizes Jesus authority, authority from God, authority he could not command; authority that can heal no matter the distance.

The centurion is different because was a man of faith. Faith based on the soundest argument. He argued from his own experience to God. If his authority produced the results it did, then Jesus with the authority of God can produce so much more – “I know you can do this!” and when Jesus hears this, it amazes him! It makes his day! This Gentile centurion expresses the greatest faith found so far in this Gospel. The affirmation by Jesus of the centurion's faith, rather than the healing miracle itself, is the point of this story (Culpepper, 146).

I love this story! I love it because Jesus is refreshed by this ‘almost encounter’ with the centurion; because Jesus tells us what really makes his day - *Finding faith such as this*. It's not the people coming great distances in tough travelling conditions to hear him and to be healed, It's the centurion who is already practicing what Jesus is teaching, the one who knows the importance of the synagogue to the community: “Love your enemies; the ... ethic is positive – [it] does not consist in *not doing things*, but in *doing them*; [it is] based on the extra thing - not just doing what is required; act in these ways because it is what God would do – love saint and sinner alike; do not judge others – look at yourself instead. (Barclay, *Luke Commentary* 76-78)

But what about the people who came to hear and be healed and were spreading the good news of all that Jesus was doing – there was no stopping it – the ministry of Jesus was gaining momentum. It was reaching far and wide – that's how the centurion in Capernaum had heard news of him. Great things were happening. How could anyone find fault with the people when they were so involved in all that was happening in Jesus ministry? And yet, in the story of the centurion we read Jesus says, “I have not found such faith in Israel.” How can he say that when he is in the middle of this great success story?

Isn't that how we often measure success in ministry today? If we witnessed the kind of success we read of in Luke, a massive following, teaching to bring about true reform, and healings for everyone because power from God just flowed... if we witnessed that happening in a church today we would call this a major success.

Would we even question if faith was present? Would we ever ask the question if the church should close or move?

There is nothing wrong with looking at success stories, and in Luke 6 we read of the success of Jesus' ministry and it is quite appropriate for Jesus to have a following like that – of course it is! But most church leaders today would be the first to admit that the faith in a church is not determined by its size, but rather by the relationship each person has with the Lord.

Faith is not about happiness based on miraculous healings or about getting the answers we wanted from God. Faith is trusting that God is good and that God can do what you ask if it is in His will. Faith is going the limit and risking it all because you trust God – the character and faithfulness of God. Faith like this is what Jesus finds in the centurion – the man who made sure God's people had a place to worship, and it turns out that place was where he knew he could go to connect with Jesus - in time of need where he was able to look for help from Jesus ...Faith like this is what Jesus is looking for – because it makes his day –

My conversation with Mark didn't end with that question about whether churches should just close, ...it actually ended with a smile and a handshake for both my mother and I as he got off at the stop before ours. He said he was very happy that we had the time for the conversation we had about God. I said I was too, and so did mom. And I was thankful for my mother sitting beside me who had taught me to pray, for the family I grew up in where there was prayer at mealtime, for the church I grew up in where I had to memorize the Lord's Prayer in Sunday School, for the family of God, for Our Father who I could talk to, for the Lord ...I hope Mark found a church where he could grow in faith.

If our church would move or close, would it matter to anyone? It would matter to Jesus. It is a good question to think about. Today we expect it would be natural for Jesus to expect to find faith in the church and we want to hear him say to us, "I have found such faith".

Does it matter to us if the church closed or moved away? I think it does, and the people I spoke to believe that it matters too. Does it matter to the community around us? Does that community know why we are here? We can tell them and show them: to welcome the children as Jesus did, to love our neighbour as ourselves, to meet Jesus, to worship God, to be a gathering place for the community, to be a place to find faith.

Today we expect to find faith in the church, but it doesn't always appear where we expect it most. And when we are looking for faith, because we should be looking to find faith like this, we should be looking first at ourselves: We are not to judge the faith of others but to examine our own faith. Faith is trusting in God, a trust that goes the limit and relieves our fears; a trust that revolves around personal relationship with God, not about making rules for right religious behavior.

I suspect there are places we don't expect to find faith, and like Jesus was, we are amazed at times when we find such faith – and it is a delight when we recognize that faith that demonstrates the authority of Jesus in a person's life.

May we be refreshed and surprised at where we *find faith such as this* when we are able to say, "I know you can do it Jesus – I believe!"

All glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit